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# The Arms of Kuss

## A review by Peggy Anderson

**The War Business: The International Trade in Armaments**
by George Thayer
Simon and Schuster, 383 pages, $6.95.

Fifty-five wars have been fought in the 24 years since 1945, George Thayer tells us, and 95 per cent of them have been fought in the underdeveloped areas of the world—with imported weapons.

This book is about the sale of arms throughout the world and the effects of that arms trade on world tensions. Thayer states his case simply: the arms trade "encourages arms races and transforms political conflicts into wars." He scarcely raises his voice as he painstakingly explains that arms—sometimes by their presence alone—have precipitated almost all the wars, and many of the political crises, since the arms trade began to boom in 1945. He argues that Nasser would not have dared provoke war with Israel had he been forced to rely on what weaponry he could scrounge from within the U.A.R.'s borders, nor would Sukarno have taken on Malaysia. The Nigerian civil war, the Indian-Pakistani war over Kashmir, the Yemeni civil war, the Congo, Korea, Vietnam—none of these would have happened, Thayer believes, if the parties involved had not had access to huge supplies of modern arms.

Thayer is a meticulous researcher with an apparent fondness for out-of-the-way topics. His 1967 book, *The Farther Shores of Politics*, explored extreme political movements in the United States; the one before that, in 1965, was about *The British Political Fringe*. His new book ably carries forward his habit of lowered voice and ample documentation. He lets his facts largely speak for themselves.

Those facts will make uncomfortable reading for Americans. Although not all the weapons involved in the wars he cites came from the United States, this country is the largest purveyor of arms in the world. And the chief trafficker in the United States is not a private merchant, in business for profit, but the United States government, "perhaps the world's most vocal proponent of disarmament."

Thayer leaves the reader in no doubt that America's reasons for getting into the arms trade in the first place made more sense than our reasons for staying in it. We began to give arms to our allies in 1940 because of the threat of a Nazi takeover in Europe. (Until then, most arms had been sold by private companies.) In furtherance of "containment" policy, the U.S. government continued to supply allies with surplus arms after the war ended. As Europe got back on its feet, it occurred to us to *sell* the arms, as a way of getting the gold flowing back in the right direction. When the surplus of arms ran out, we began to fill orders from abroad with up-to-date weapons off the assembly line.

In the 25 years since World War II, Thayer tells us, non-communist countries have given or sold $59 billion worth of military aid to other countries. The United States accounts for $50 billion of that sum—in aid that has gone to some 80 nations in all, at the rate of about $2 billion a year. And the rate is rising, although "containment" is no longer the rationale. Under the new names—"balance of power" and "balance of payments"—the U.S. will sell the most provocative matériel to non-communist countries, the only stipulation being that the recipient nation "promise" to use the purchase solely for defensive purposes.

Because the volume of our arms transactions exceeds that of any other nation, America is implicated more than any other nation in the results of those transactions. Among the achievements Thayer attributes to U.S. arms policy—and the high-pressure way it is conducted—are the Indian-Pakistani